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The Accessibility of the Avant-garde: Talk about American Experimental Cinema

Michele Pierson

Even though it is probably not the first word anyone thinks of when they think of experimental cinema, critics and curators regularly describe experimental films, or an experimental filmmakers' work, as accessible. The films of Peggy Ahwesh, Barbara Hammer, and Lewis Klahr have all been described in this way. In the lead up to a screening of Klahr's *Engram Sepals* series of films at the Walter Reade Theater in New York in 2000, Michael Atkinson described Klahr as "[o]ne of the most evocative, accessible, and culturally aware experimental filmmakers alive and working".¹ Sometimes it is a single film that attracts this kind of critical commentary. "Did I mention," Genevieve Yue wrote after a screening of Ken Jacobs' *Star Spangled To Death* at the International Film Festival Rotterdam in 2004 "that the film is six and a half hours long? It is also incredibly entertaining, funny, and accessible—perhaps more so than any avant-garde film I've ever seen."² Nor is it only recent films, or films made since the 1970s, which get singled out for their accessibility. In the first of his five volume series of interviews with independent filmmakers, Scott MacDonald identified the "first three sections of *Hapax Legomena*—*nostalgia* (1971), *Poetic Justice* (1972), and *Critical Mass* (1971)" as "some of Frampton's most impressive (and accessible) films."³ Other filmmakers in MacDonald's *Critical Cinema* series of books whose films have been identified as accessible, or who themselves identify accessibility as an issue informing their

This essay has benefited greatly from feedback on earlier drafts from Erika Balsom, James Leo Cahill, David E. James, Genevieve Yue, and Mike Zryd.

¹ Michael Atkinson, "The Re-Animator: Culture Consumer Lewis Klahr," *The Village Voice*, May 23, 2000, 148.

² Genevieve Yue, "The Movies that Make Up our Minds: Ken Jacobs and the Avant-Garde at the Rotterdam Film Festival 2004," Festival Reports, *Senses of Cinema* 31 (April 2004). Accessed June 25, 2017. Available at: http://sensesofcinema.com/2004/festival-reports/rotterdam_2004/

³ Scott MacDonald, "Hollis Frampton," in *A Critical Cinema: Interviews with Independent Filmmakers* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press), 24.

own thinking about their work, include Robert Breer, Su Friedrich, James Benning, and Alan Berliner.

What critics seem, at least some of the time, to be suggesting when they describe a film or filmmakers' body of work as accessible is that it offers readily available ways of being appreciated and enjoyed. Accessible films, they agree, are pleasureable—entertaining. Any number of things might have attracted this kind of critical commentary; a certain type of drama, humor, or conceptual clarity. On rare occasion, critics have been more forthcoming about what it is about a film or type of avant-garde filmmaking that strikes them as accessible. It seemed to Noël Carroll in the mid-1980s, for instance, that “found footage films have a degree of accessibility that other avant-garde approaches may lack.”⁴ The “accessibility of the imagery of the found footage along with its audience-pleasing parodic potentials make it immediately attractive,” he wrote, “to the avant-garde polemicist seeking to reach wider audiences.”⁵ On this understanding, it is films that have formal features familiar, or recognizable, from other art and popular culture, which makes them accessible. The commonplace association of accessibility with availability further identifies it with an immediacy of appeal, whether sensory-perceptual, phenomenological, or conceptual.

By and large, commonplace understandings of accessibility are what we have to work with. As far as the scholarly literature on experimental film and art is concerned there is no critical-theoretical literature on accessibility. The reasons for this are ready enough to hand. From P. Adams Sitney's and Annette Michelson's writing on North American avant-garde film in the late-1960s and 1970s, through to Carroll's writing in the 1980s and beyond, the common touchstone for any kind of theorization of avant-garde or experimental film has been modernism. The problem is not that thinking about modernism is, in and of itself, an obstacle

⁴ Noël Carroll, “Film in the Age of Postmodernism,” in *Interpreting the Moving Image* (Cambridge, UK and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 315. This essay was first published as “Film,” in *The Postmodern Moment: A Handbook of Contemporary Innovation in the Arts*, ed. Stanley Trachtenberg (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1985).

⁵ Carroll, “Film in the Age of Postmodernism,” 315-316.

to thinking about accessibility but rather, that modernism has so often been associated by critics with difficulty. If we look beyond experimental cinema to critical commentary on modernism more broadly, we are overwhelmed, in fact, with instances of critics and artists identifying modernism with difficulty. Consider, for instance, Clement Greenberg's famous championing of difficulty in "Avant-Garde and Kitsch" (1939). In comparing the paintings of Pablo Picasso and Ilya Repin, he wrote that: "Repin predigests art for the spectator and spares him effort, provides him with a short cut to the pleasure of art that detours what is necessarily difficult in genuine art."⁶ Even where we find criticism of the tendency to associate difficulty with a narrow range of experiences and a narrow range of art, difficulty still remains a privileged value. One of the arguments Jennifer Doyle makes in a moving defense of emotionally confrontational performance, film, and photographic works by artists such as Ron Athey, David Wojnarowicz, and Carrie Mae Weems is that the art world has successfully communicated the idea "that certain forms of difficulty are good for us: the illegibility of nonfigurative and nonrepresentational work; the austerity of abstraction and minimalism; the rigor of institutional critique."⁷ Doyle's point is that art which takes difficult emotional territory as its subject matter and material (ambivalence, intimacy, aggression, anger), rarely receives the same level of institutional endorsement. If difficulty remains an especially important aesthetic value in Doyle's writing, she also makes the observation that all kinds of art may be difficult in some respects and accessible in others.⁸ The fact that this point needs to be made highlights a problem with how we routinely use these terms to talk about avant-garde art and cinema.

⁶ Clement Greenberg, "Avant-Garde and Kitsch," in *Art and Culture: Critical Essays* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1989), 15.

⁷ Jennifer Doyle, *Hold It Against Me: Difficulty and Emotion in Contemporary Art* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2013), xvii.

⁸ Citing Electronic Disturbance Theater's *Transborder Immigrant Tool* and La Pocha Nostra's *Mapa/Corpo* as examples, she writes: "On many levels, these works are in fact more accessible to audiences than minimalist sculpture—but this, for some critics, is exactly the problem." See Doyle, *Hold It Against Me*, 12.

Any critical-theoretical rethinking of accessibility within the context of American experimental cinema has to begin, I suggest, by interrogating some taken-for-granted narratives about modernism. The groundwork for reconceiving modernism from the perspective of engaging with specific communities of artists and diverse kinds of experimental film practices was laid a little over a decade ago in David E. James' history of avant-garde filmmaking in Los Angeles, and in Juan A. Suárez's examination of the social and artistic milieu in which artists such as Joseph Cornell, Helen Levitt, Paul Strand, and Parker Tyler worked in the first half of the twentieth-century.⁹ Both identify a multiply inflected *populist* or *popular* modernism in avant-garde works engaged in dialogue with other art forms, including popular and mass culture. Earlier essays by Tom Gunning and Jan-Christopher Horak also identified important forms of avant-garde filmmaking neglected by and even unrecognizable within a masterpiece tradition of avant-garde film historiography and film programming. In films made in the 1980s by Ahwesh, Mark Lapore, Klahr, and Phil Solomon, Gunning identified a 'minor cinema' engaged with the aesthetic legacies of a previous generation of avant-garde filmmaking, but critical of that generation's claims to a certain kind of mastery, and assertive in its location of the political in that which "*seems most personal*."¹⁰ In mapping the diverse kinds of films that got made by artists prior to 1945—city films, animated films, experimental films made with commercial sponsorship, or by

⁹ See David E. James, *The Most Typical Avant-Garde History and Geography of Minor Cinemas in Los Angeles* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press, 2005) and Juan A. Suárez, *Pop Modernism: Noise and the Reinvention of the Everyday* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2007).

¹⁰ See Tom Gunning, "Towards a Minor Cinema: Fonoroff, Herwitz, Ahwesh, Lapore, Klahr and Solomon," *Motion Picture 3*, nos. 1/2 (Winter 1989-90): 2-5. In Gunning's words: "The ghetto is not an ivory tower, and it finds an antiseptic, hermetic isolation impossible. The tremors of history are felt with re-doubled intensity within the ghetto (as Deleuze and Guattari say, in a minor literature everything becomes political, especially that which *seems most personal*)," 3.

gentlemen amateurs, or industry professionals making films in their spare time—Horak argued for an even broader understanding of avant-garde filmmaking.¹¹

This essay's thinking about accessibility shares with the work of these scholars an interest in looking at the often quite local networks of practitioners and institutions, which have supported experimental filmmaking in particular places and at particular times. It also differs from these studies in two ways. First, insofar as it is concerned with the history of an artisanal, post-war experimental film practice, still largely made by individuals, and still largely made for non-theatrical exhibition, its focus is narrower. Second, it makes a different argument about modernism. The critical, revisionist project of much historical work in the field has been to show that, while an understanding of modernism derived from Greenberg's influential account of it, became the dominant discourse on film modernism in the 1960s and 1970s, there are other ways of identifying it.

While I share this desire to map the actually existing scope and variety of avant-garde film modernisms, the impetus for this essay's reconsideration of modernism lies in challenging the view that what we have in Michelson's and Sitney's writing on experimental film in the 1960s and 1970s is a view of modernism entirely incompatible with this project. Because the picture we get of it in their film criticism isn't a mirror image of the one we find in Greenberg's criticism. In "About Snow" (1979), Michelson drew a parallel between new developments in experimental filmmaking and minimalism, but neither in that essay, nor in Sitney's writing on structural film, do we find modernism reduced to a single formal paradigm. There is no question that for Sitney, as for Michelson, structural film represented a new modernist trajectory for avant-garde film, but the telescoping of modernism to a version of it honed by Greenberg, and mapping of that model onto structural film, comes later, in accounts of experimental film offered by Carroll and J. Hoberman (among others), in the

¹¹ See Jan Christopher-Horak, "The First American Avant-Garde, 1919-1945," in *Lovers of Cinema: The First American Film Avant-Garde 1919-1945*, ed. Jan Christopher-Horak (Madison, WI and London: University of Wisconsin Press, 1995), 14-66.

1980s. The point of looking at Michelson's and Sitney's writing again isn't to rescue them or the films they wrote about from their critics; they are, after all, hardly in need of such rescue. It is, rather, to show how, in simplifying their accounts of modernism, and in dismissing their approaches to film analysis as narrowly formalist, critics passed over those aspects of their theorizing that actually have something to contribute to a rethinking of accessibility.

It is just as clear, however, that accessibility points us towards something that neither the excavation of multiple cinematic modernisms, nor arguments for distinguishing between Greenberg's version of modernism and the version of modernism that we find in Michelson's and Sitney's writing on structural film, by themselves open up. While uncoupling accessibility from difficulty necessitates working through the residual entanglement of structural film, modernism, and difficulty in critical writing on experimental film, the interest of accessibility lies in the fact that it also points us towards something else: to the need, in short, to also engage with the social, institutional circumstances in which experimental films are *made* or *become* accessible.

Two propositions follow from these observations. The first is that not all artworks are equally accessible. If we're to avoid the empirical problem that plagues much of the writing on difficulty—so that an artwork is only difficult until it is made accessible through familiarity with and appreciation of the ideas and values informing it—there does need to be agreement that what makes a film accessible has something to do with the type of film it is. That experimental films may be more and less open, their materials and techniques of arrangement offering more and less avenues for their understanding and enjoyment, is key to this essay's thinking about accessibility.

We need, however, to see accessibility not only as something that describes some films or artworks better than others, but as a social value embedded into a whole set of discursive protocols and critical practices, which historically have been integral to the exhibition of experimental cinema. Experimental films are framed by the social spaces in which they are

encountered and the event they are the occasion for (a regular screening program, festival, exhibition, symposium, or conference). They are framed through artist statements in program notes and catalogues, and by curatorial and programming statements, but also through the selection of films and performances for exhibition. They circulate, in a small number of cases, with long histories of review and criticism behind them; some of it written by filmmakers themselves and, increasingly in this age of online publishing, in the context of ideas generated through interviews. And all of this is cumulative and expanding: films made throughout the twentieth-century still get programmed, and expanded cinema performances first presented to audiences in the 1960s and 1970s, re-staged. If we really want to know how films and other artworks have been thought over the years, or even decades, then we need to look at their critical reception, but also at their exhibition and programming.

It would be perfectly reasonable for someone to assume that, whether accessibility describes something about the formal, aesthetic features of a film or expanded cinema performance, or the critical, social and institutional framing of it for an audience—and it is the argument of this essay that the two cannot be separated—what is at stake is its appeal to, or attempt to reach, a *general* or *wider* audience or public. This assumption is, after all, explicit in Carroll's comments about the accessibility of found footage film. Simply stated, this is not the case that is being made here. Experimental films are made for experimental film audiences. The development of non-theatrical venues for experimental film screenings in North American cities, which gathered momentum in the second half of the 1960s, and accelerated in the 1970s, has supported diverse kinds of experimental film, media and performance practice, all made, by and large, for the many small, frequently overlapping audiences, which gather to watch and talk about experimental cinema.¹² None of which is to suggest that experimental

¹² If there is a form of experimental cinema that bucks this pattern of distribution and non-theatrical exhibition it is the feature length experimental film that reflexively draws upon avant-garde and documentary modes, and circulates, through festival and museum screenings,

filmmakers haven't also or sometimes made work for other kinds of audiences, or that work not made with the intention of attracting new audiences hasn't, through distribution and exhibition, or a well placed review, reached and been enjoyed by them. Since the mid-1970s, there have, for instance, been a number of initiatives to interest new audiences in experimental film through programs on public television. There is nothing about valuing making films for small audiences, which is incompatible with also making other kinds of work. Examples, for instance, of public art made just by those experimental filmmakers already mentioned, here, include Ahwesh's *City Thermogram* (Times Square, NY, 2015) and Solomon's *American Falls* (commissioned by, and first shown at, the Corcoran Gallery of Art in Washington DC, 2010).

If the number of American experimental filmmakers who have commercial gallery representation remains proportionately small, more experimental filmmakers are making or retooling work for galleries than at any other time, and the programming of many experimental film festivals has expanded to include installation along with film screenings and performance.¹³ Thinking across these sites of exhibition has been one of the conceptual drivers of Sandra Gibson and Luis Recoder's collaborative practice. Of more interest than the fact that their practice spans expanded cinema performance and installation, is the ways in which they bring those two practices into conversation. Their camera obscura installation, *Topsy Turvy* was commissioned by Madison Square Park Conservancy's Mad. Sq. Art public art program. For a month in Spring 2013, *Topsy Turvy* presented visitors to Madison Square

as both experimental and documentary cinema, and occasionally secures limited theatrical distribution.

¹³ To look only at the filmmakers mentioned in this essay, Hammer is represented by the Koch Oberhuber Woolfe gallery (Berlin); Klahr by the Anthony Reynolds gallery (London); and Luther Price by Callicoon Fine Arts (New York). Ahwesh regularly makes work for gallery exhibition. On artists' moving image in the gallery see Erika Balsom, *Exhibiting Cinema in Contemporary Art* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2014). Also see her assessment of the viability of the limited edition model of distribution in artists' cinema in "Original Copies: How Film and Video Became Art Objects," *Cinema Journal* 53, no. 1 (Fall 2013).

Park with a small, cylindrical chamber, just big enough for a small group.¹⁴ On a clear day, visitors who ventured into the chamber found themselves surrounded by a panorama of an iconic Manhattan skyline: in color, moving, becoming more and less vivid over time, and upside down. *Topsy Turvy* was identifiable to visitors knowledgeable about contemporary art and experimental film as a work that is in dialogue with other expanded cinema works, which have explored the technologies and techniques for projecting moving images before and after the development of cinema. It is also a work that was made to be enjoyed by visitors who don't share this knowledge. Rather than have security guards usher visitors in and out of the camera obscura, Gibson and Recoder hired local students to work as ushers who would also be happy to answer questions if called upon. People with no knowledge of avant-garde art and experimental film—curious passers-by, teenagers and kids—could enjoy the simple mystery of the apparatus with or without input from one of the guides.

Individual experimental filmmakers have made producing works of public art part of their practice for several decades now. In North America, the institutional field of experimental cinema nevertheless remains, by and large, a cinema addressed to the discursive communities that already constituted its core audience in the 1970s. While there has been little empirical study of these communities, through personal accounts of audiences by filmmakers and programmers, we have, in fact, always known quite a lot about them.¹⁵ By core audience I mean the people who regularly congregate at screenings and who participate, one way or another, in conversation about it.

Much about the landscape of experimental film exhibition has changed since the 1970s, but much about it has also remained constant. Like other types of cinema, many experimental

¹⁴ *Topsy Turvy* was installed in Madison Square Park March 1 to April 7, 2013. It then moved to *Brooklyn Bridge Park* from September 27 to November 10, 2013.

¹⁵ One such study can be found in Todd Bayma, "Art World Culture and Institutional Choices: The Case of Experimental Film," *Sociological Quarterly* 36, no. 1 (1995): 79-95. See Michael Zryd's discussion of this work in his "The Academy and the Avant-Garde: A Relationship of Dependence and Resistance," *Cinema Journal* 45, no. 2 (Winter 2006): 25-29.

films now circulate in multiple formats, are viewed on multiple devices, and are being shared and discussed remotely with unprecedented ease. Having faced reduced rentals from universities once 16mm projectors started to be junked in favor of digital projection systems, DVD, Blu-Ray, and online video formats, a small but steady trickle of DVDs made available for institutional and individual purchase is now coming from filmmakers' cooperatives and European distributors of experimental film. Independent DVD labels, online video archives supported by major film archives and distributors of artists' film and video, free and subscription online video services, file sharing sites, and Vimeo uploads provided by filmmakers themselves, have opened up still larger reservoirs of experimental films for study and home viewing. At the same time, museums, art centers, film archives, universities, artist-run spaces, film festivals, and micro-cinemas all remain as important for the coming together of audiences today as they did in the 1970s.¹⁶ What we have seen, particularly since the 1990s, is expansion, not in the size of the audiences who turn up to film screenings, nor in terms of the broadening of core constituencies for particular venues and events, but expansion, rather, in the number and diversity of screenings. If the combined audience for these screenings has increased, it bears pointing out that, in North America, as in Europe, experimental film screenings still have by far the greatest concentration in cities (and in larger cities at that).

Expansion of exhibition has taken the form, then, of new experimental film and media arts festivals; the creation of experimental sidebars within major international film festivals; increased programming of experimental film, performance and installation within LGBTQ and other identity focused festivals; increased film screenings in galleries; and renewal of small scale, individually run and, often, mobile screening spaces or micro-cinemas.¹⁷ What we find, in other words, is a greater variety of differently orientated programs appealing to

¹⁶ On microcinema see Donna De Ville, "The Persistent Transience of Microcinema (in the United States and Canada)," *Film History* 27, no. 3 (2015): 104-136.

¹⁷ See *Incite Journal of Experimental Media* 4, *Exhibition Guide* (Fall 2013). See, in particular, Ed Halter, "Head Space: Notes on the Recent History of a Self-Sustained Exhibition Scene for American Experimental Cinema," 22-33.

small, overlapping, communities of interest and taste. Recognizing that the historical trajectory for experimental film screenings has been one of specialization is important for thinking about accessibility. It orients our interest in experimental cinema in the often quite local forms of social and institutional support, which create interest and momentum around particular practices.

It is not that there hasn't also been discussion and debate over the last fifty years, about the potential for, and obstacles to, introducing experimental films to an audience that, one way or another, isn't already invested in and knowledgeable about experimental cinema. Once again, there has. The point is that the paper trail indicating what got shown where, who organizers thought their audience was, and who remembers who being there, points to a different kind of audience. Wherever we might look for accounts of audiences for experimental film, we find, in fact, the same descriptions of them. When the *New York Times* film critic, Howard Thompson, asked half a dozen audience members for their response to the first public screening (of Alexander Dovzhenko's *Ivan* [1932]) at the Invisible Theater at Anthology Film Archives in 1970, what he got were responses from two artists, someone studying film at the School of Visual Arts, a student at New York University, a graduate of NYU with a master's degree in film, and "[a]nother youth who declined identification."¹⁸ Asked, in the mid-1980s, what kind of audience comes to film screenings at the Millennium Film Workshop, then Director Howard Guttenplan described much the same group of people: "Filmmakers, film students, people interested in the arts, and their friends."¹⁹

¹⁸ See Howard Thompson, "Silence Says A Lot For Film Archives," *New York Times*, December 4, 1970, 55.

¹⁹ Scott MacDonald, "The Millennium after Twenty Years: An Interview with Howard Guttenplan," *Millennium Film Journal* 16/17/18 (Fall/Winter 1986-1987): 15. Dan McLaughlin's assessment of audiences in 1986 wasn't all that different. "Audiences," he offered, "consist of: 1) other experimental film/video makers; 2) the few interested in experimental film/video making; 3) family, friends, and lovers who come out of a sense of loyalty; 4) those from mainstream films that want to rip off any new techniques; 5) all others. The only two categories that count, one and two (and maybe three, depending), are small in number. As long as these people are the audience, size is unimportant." Dan McLaughlin in

Michael Zryd's research into the relationship between the academy and the avant-garde points out that, in North America, the expansion of film studies as a discipline within Liberal Arts has continued to produce generations of audiences through the training of teachers, critics, scholars, and programmers. Experimental cinema's other audience, he notes, is a college classroom audience.²⁰ Another kind of essay on the accessibility of the avant-garde might inquire after this audience, looking at how and by whom and in what circumstances students have been taught experimental film. My interest in accessibility lies in the different but related concern to identify the obstacles to recognizing accessibility as a core aesthetic and social value for experimental cinema, and to map the directions for research that thinking about it opens up.

Accessibility and Modernism

In the preface to a vast survey of early twentieth century criticism of modernist art, Leonard Diepeveen makes the observation that "casualness typifies modern comments on difficulty."²¹ The same kind of casual commentary on difficulty is also to be found in criticism of experimental film, where it almost always refers to structural film. Notably, Sitney himself thought better of identifying structural film with difficulty. Only the second of three published versions of "Structural Film" (1969) makes reference to it.²² The context is an analysis of Jacobs' *Tom, Tom, The Piper's Son* (1969-71). "It is almost as if the film intended," Sitney wrote, "to prove once and for all the postulates of Russian formalist criticism." His

"Point of View," *Spiral* 8 (July 1986), 7. McLaughlin's views were offered in response to an invitation by journal editor, Terry Cannon, to "address the topic of declining audiences for experimental film, and to offer reasons for this seemingly dismal state of affairs." See "Point of View," 7.

²⁰ See Zryd, "The Academy and the Avant-Garde: A Relationship of Dependence and Resistance," 17-42.

²¹ Leonard Diepeveen, *The Difficulties of Modernism* (New York and London: Routledge, 2003), xiii.

²² See P. Adams Sitney, "Structural Film," in *Film Culture Reader*, ed. P. Adams Sitney (New York: Cooper Square, 2000).

citation from Victor Shklovsky's *Art as Technique* (1917) includes the proposition that: "The technique of art is to make objects 'unfamiliar,' to make forms difficult, to increase the difficulty and length of perception because the process of perception is an aesthetic end in itself and must be prolonged."²³ Formal difficulty is defined, here, by strategies of defamiliarization: techniques for impeding the automatism of ordinary perception. Unfamiliarity is key, in Shklovsky's view, to slowing down perception and creating circumstances conducive to producing an experience of the artwork that is part of what the artwork is about.

One of the things Sitney might have hoped to avoid by excising reference to difficulty from his analysis of *Tom, Tom, The Piper's Son* in *Visionary Film* (1974) was giving the impression that there is a single formal-historical trajectory for a modernist avant-garde cinema, which culminates in structural film. In *Visionary Film* the movement towards ever more condensed and complex forms that he identifies in films by Gregory Markopolous, Stan Brakhage and Peter Kubelka (among others) represents one formal-historical trajectory for a modernist, avant-garde cinema, and the movement towards a type of filmmaking concerned with the simultaneous exploitation and revelation of the illusionistic capacities of cinema found in films by Michael Snow, Paul Sharits, and Frampton, represents another. Although Sitney pointedly avoided any direct comparison between structural film and minimalism, and disagreed with Greenberg's proposition that modernism entails the elimination of all effects borrowed from the medium of any other art (what would later be called 'medium specificity'), his identification, in structural film, of strategies for bringing spectators to an apperceptive awareness of cinema's materials, contributed to the tendency of later critics to represent structural film as modernism in the mode of Greenberg. In "After the Avant-Garde" (1983) Hoberman wrote that this "'new' modernism was anti-illusionist and reflexive, essentialist and didactic, an investigation of cinema's own unique and irreducible properties and

²³ Sitney, "Structural Film," 335-336.

operations. It was the modernism of Clement Greenberg, transplanted from the art world (courtesy of Andy Warhol).”²⁴

The versions of modernism and of structural film produced not just by Hoberman, but by many writers since, have been much more streamlined than those we find in either Sitney’s or Michelson’s writing.²⁵ According to Sitney’s own readings of individual films, structural films put basic formal strategies shared by all kinds of art and all kinds of media—narrative, drama, metaphor—in the service of formal-conceptual exploration of cinema’s own capacities for organizing perception. It was on precisely these grounds that the British critic, Deke Dusinberre, considered the structural films made by North American filmmakers to be less rigorously formalist than some other, European, films. Dusinberre clearly had Michelson’s reading of *Wavelength* in “Toward Snow” (1971) in mind when he remarked “that the larger tradition of American avant-garde film-making has exploited such analogic techniques—primarily that of the metaphor, in which the formal concerns of film-making are conflated with another perceptual or epistemological or philosophical problem.”²⁶ What Sitney’s and Michelson’s writing on the kinds of films that Sitney dubbed structural film did that some later criticism didn’t is recognize the potential for this cinema to be experienced and understood in different ways. While those readings certainly privileged conceptual over corporeal and phenomenological modes of understanding, placing more emphasis on what

²⁴ J. Hoberman, “After Avant-Garde Film,” in *Art After Modernism: Rethinking Representation*, ed. and intro. Brian Wallis, fwd. Marcia Tucker (New York: New Museum of Contemporary Art and Boston: David R. Godine, Publisher, 1988), 64-65. First published 1984.

²⁵ Jonathan Walley notes that: “Attempts to isolate the medium-specific in film frequently produced laundry lists of film’s basic material and physical properties.” See his “Identity Crisis: Experimental Film and Artistic Expansion,” *October* 137 (Summer 2011), 30-31.

²⁶ Deke Dusinberre, “The Ascetic Task: Peter Gidal’s *Room Film 1973*,” in *Structural Film Anthology*, ed. and intro. Peter Gidal (London: BFI, 1978), 110.

those films make it possible to think than to feel, they also understood those ideas to be produced in and through phenomenological experience.²⁷

What was different about structural film, from Michelson's perspective, was its engagement with and contribution to minimalism; an engagement characterized above all by a systematic exploration of perception. Far from being strictly and narrowly formalist, Michelson's view of cinema more broadly—and articulated most clearly during this period in "Film and Radical Aspiration" (1966)—gestured towards a more archaeological and, relatedly, situational model of cinema. Her identification of the wax museum as a kind of "proto-cinema" in "its very special, hallucinatory darkness, its spatial ambiguity, its forcing of movement upon the spectator, its mixture of diversion and didacticism" pointed towards a model of cinema as *dispositif* or viewing situation.²⁸ It is a model that then, as now, was crucial for the development of audiences for experimental film and, within that context, for the development of critics' and filmmakers' thinking about expanded cinema.

Essentialist, didactic, film about film: Hoberman's description of structural film was a caricature, but like any good caricature it also illuminates a feature that is useful. Rather than presenting structural film as difficult in the sense, indicated by Shklovsky, that it prolongs the process of obtaining any kind of conceptual purchase on its formal intentionality, Hoberman's description suggests that on this score, in fact, structural films are highly communicative. If accessibility is understood to describe the level of a film's communicativeness with respect to its formal intentionality, then many structural films might be regarded as among the most accessible avant-garde films ever made. But the other idea that Hoberman's description of structural film gets at is that with restriction of form comes restriction of interpretation.

²⁷ For a critique of, and alternative, to this approach see Ara Osterweil, *Flesh Cinema: The Corporeal Turn in American Avant-garde Film* (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 2014).

²⁸ Annette Michelson, "Film and Radical Aspiration," *Film Culture* 42 (Fall 1966), 35.

Surveying avant-garde filmmaking in the early 1980s, it seemed to Hoberman that there were at least two challengers to structural film; a mode of filmmaking that, in his view, had long since come to represent the only “authentically modernist film avant-garde”.²⁹ In films by Jackie Raynal, Yvonne Rainer, Babette Mangolte, and Chantal Akerman, he identified a “post-structural” avant-garde preoccupied by the cultural conditions of language, subjectivity, and sexuality, and their implications for cinematic representation. The Super-8 films made by the young filmmakers associated with the short-lived New York No Wave (1978–79) clearly had, on the other hand, quite different aesthetic and social aims. In these filmmakers’ embrace of pastiche, parody and sub-standard equipment Hoberman identified a “postmodern” reprisal of the underground aesthetics of the 1960s.³⁰ Modernist hegemony had, in other words, yielded to postmodern diversity.

Carroll and Paul Arthur, two critics who were also engaged in taking stock of the field of American experimental filmmaking in the 1980s, were agreed.³¹ To the extent that these critics’ siding with the “poststructuralists” and “postmoderns” against modernism shifted interest away from the most written about and feted avant-garde filmmakers—a cadre that was overwhelmingly male and white—it was also productive. Only with hindsight has it become clear that this way of dividing up the field also slowed up asking what the existing models for identifying a modernist, avant-garde film practice, have actually been.

While Sitney’s and Michelson’s identification of just two trajectories for a modernist avant-garde cinema was limiting and certainly determined the kind and range of work they wrote about, in principle at least, it pointed the way—if by no means the only way—to identifying others. The obvious direction in which to look for another modernist trajectory for experimental cinema was collage. In filmmakers’ use of found materials, deployment of

²⁹ Hoberman, “After Avant-Garde Film,” 64.

³⁰ Hoberman, “After Avant-Garde Film,” 65-70.

³¹ See Paul Arthur, “The Last of the Machine?: Avant-Garde Film Since 1966,” *Millennium Film Journal* 16/17/18 (Fall/Winter 1986-1987), 81-89.

citation or pastiche, or mixing of the modalities of narrative fiction and documentary (and in any combination of the above), we find collage. Collage strategies are also at work in films made right across the decades, from Joseph Cornell's early films, to underground films, and the great variety of personal cinema made in the 1980s and 1990s and beyond: the diary and portrait films, personal ethnographies, and psycho-social dramas (think *From Romance to Ritual* [Peggy Ahwesh, 1985], the *Peggy and Fred* series [Leslie Thornton, 1984-2016], and *Home* [Luther Price, 1999], rather than *Dog Star Man* [Stan Brakhage, 1961-64]). In this other modernist trajectory for experimental cinema what we have, in fact, are all kinds of films, which in their adoption of strategies for bringing multiple types of organizing activity to bear on their meaning and interpretation, make accessibility an organizing principle of the work.

It would not be accurate to characterize the 1980s as a decade in which narratives of crisis and urgent calls for self-reflection and revision—the end of the avant-garde, the decline of audiences, the necessity of dispensing with formalist criticism—dominated criticism and discussion of experimental film, but they did proliferate. Towards the end of the 1980s, Arthur wrote that the tide had turned for critical writing about avant-garde film. Critics, he argued, were being increasingly called upon to recognize the disabling limitations of formalist film analysis (which Sitney's and Michelson's writing had come to represent). In his words: "Proponents call for the working out of a materialist hermeneutic that could force criticism beyond the text in mapping the historical role of the avant-garde in larger systems of social and economic circulation." It was, in his view, a critical injunction "impossible *not* to endorse."³² As familiar today as it was in the 1980s, one of the problems with this injunction is that it has tended to skirt engaging with the range of ways that the kind of criticism that gets described as formalist actually gets practiced: missing, in the process, the opportunity to think about how such criticism has functioned within larger social and economic systems (but

³² Arthur, "The Last of the Machine?", 73.

especially within a wide range of broadly educational systems).³³ The more significant oversight at work here, however, concerns the failure to address the fact that it isn't only (formalist) film criticism that thinks films in relationship to other films, finding in their methods and modes of address, areas of exploration in common. This is something that thematic, conceptual and historical forms of film programming also do.

Programmers and critics both look to films for ways of working in common with other films and other types of art. It is how connections between work by different filmmakers are made, and commonalities between work made by artists whose medium, or practice, is different are identified. Getting a sense, then, of how variously and creatively a film, or mode of filmmaking, or even a filmmakers' body of work, has been framed for audiences over the years, means looking at how it has been written about—and in all kinds of publications and contexts—but also at where and how, and sometimes by whom, it has been programmed.

Accessibility In Situ

In a now well-known special film issue of *Artforum* (1971) Michelson published three letters by way of a foreword: the first, a short note in which Peter Gidal takes her to task for her “wrongheaded” reading of *Wavelength*; the second a response from her that includes a note about the state of avant-garde film criticism in the US and a comment on the importance of Anthology Film Archives; and the third a defense of the selection process for the film collection at Anthology from Jonas Mekas.³⁴ The interest of Michelson's letter lies in her

³³ Where we do get an account of how academic writing on experimental film, more broadly, has contributed both to the promotion, circulation, and teaching of experimental film, and to how film studies gets taught, is in Zryd, “The Academy and the Avant-Garde,” 31-32.

³⁴ See Annette Michelson, “Foreword in Three Letters,” *Artforum* 10, no. 1 (September 1971), 8-10. On the selection committee for the Essential Cinema series was James Broughton, Ken Kelman, Peter Kubelka, Mekas and Sitney. In 1975 Sitney described the relationship between the establishment of Anthology Film Archives and the collection of films to be shown there like this: “Anthology Film Archives was conceived from the very beginning as a critical enterprise. An attempt was made to formulate, acquire, and frequently exhibit a nuclear collection of the monuments of cinematic art. In the course of formulating the collection, the

identification of the film collection (which would come to be known as the Essential Cinema series), and the Invisible Cinema in which it was shown, as a critical enterprise operating at two, necessarily intertwined, levels; the first, the contextualization of avant-garde filmmaking in relationship to film art more broadly and, the second, the training of artists and critics in the formal operations of new forms of avant-garde filmmaking through attentive viewing (what she described as a “disciplined readjustment of the perceptive processes which film requires of artist and audience”).³⁵ She doesn’t suggest that film screenings, and the attentive viewing they encourage, is the only site for the training of ‘artist and audience,’ but that it is a crucial one. “The existence of Anthology,” she wrote, “is a radical critical gesture,” which has “made accessible a corpus of advanced filmic art set in a rich, if incomplete context, and in projection conditions—those of an ‘Invisible Cinema’—superior to those of any institution in this city.”³⁶ Then, as now, many experimental filmmakers and programmers would likely have balked at the idea that the way to come at a film screening is as a form of perceptual training. To some eyes, at least, it will conjure just the kind of repressive disciplinary regime that some critics still associate with structural film and the Invisible Cinema.³⁷ On the other hand, what is learning through experience if not some kind of training (as much social as perceptual)?³⁸ Looking at the discursive protocols of experimental film exhibition, it is clear that embedded into the practices of providing program notes, of introducing films, and having

members of the selection committee discovered that no single systematic aesthetic could operate.” See P. Adams Sitney, “Introduction,” *The Essential Cinema: Essays on the Films in the Collection of Anthology Film Archives*, Volume One, ed. P. Adams Sitney with Caroline Sergeant Angell (New York: Anthology Film Archives, 1985), v. First printed 1975.

³⁵ Michelson, “Foreword in Three Letters,” 9.

³⁶ Michelson, “Foreword in Three Letters,” 9.

³⁷ The disciplinary architecture of the short-lived Invisible Cinema has come in for some pointed criticism from art historians in recent years. See, for instance, Andrew V. Uroskie, *Between the Black Box and the White Cube: Expanded Cinema and Postwar Art: Expanded Cinema and Postwar Art* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2014), 44-45.

³⁸ Writing about the Invisible Cinema right after it closed in 1974, Kubelka was keen to stress that while the hooded seats prevented people from meeting the eyes of the person beside them, they could touch them, could feel their presence, and feel themselves to be part of an audience (a “sympathetic community”). See Peter Kubelka, “The Invisible Cinema,” *Design Quarterly* 93, Film Spaces (1974), 34.

some kind of after-show discussion between audience and filmmaker (or programmer or critic), has been an assumption that making films accessible to audiences is different to simply making them available to be seen. Over the years, critics and scholars have offered any number of anecdotes recounting how a film became more satisfying with the benefit of program notes or an explanation from the filmmaker. The other thing these practices enable is for films to be discovered—and to be made to be discovered—over time. Talking to Mark Webber, in 2007, Michelson recalled that: “What attracted me to Gehr and Sharits was the way in which, very differently, they took apart the cinema, and presented its analysis as a film. Which is to say, in Ernie Gehr’s early films, you didn’t always know what you were looking at, and particularly in one [*History*, 1970], you had to be told afterwards what it was you’d seen.”³⁹

Post-war avant-garde film screenings borrowed the practice of providing audiences handbills from film society and museum screenings. MacDonald’s dossiers on Art and Cinema (1946-55) and Cinema 16 (1947-1963) reveal a range of approaches to program notes still in practice today. In the case of the Art and Cinema series at the San Francisco Museum of Art, notes written by Iris Barry, the first curator of the Museum of Modern Art’s Film Library, accompanied many of the early, European avant-garde films sourced from MoMA, and at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, programmer Frank Stauffacher also wrote program notes. Other program notes excerpted criticism from distinguished critics, distribution catalogue entries, and filmmakers themselves wrote others. From the end of the 1960s, it was increasingly the case that filmmakers provided their own program notes. One explanation for this change was that new vocabularies were required for new forms of filmmaking (structural film), and since filmmakers were at the center of this rethinking of film

³⁹ Michelson added: “And you were told that what you were seeing was film stock for one thing, as it’s projected through a projector.” See “Annette Michelson by Mark Webber,” in *Speaking Directly: Oral Histories of the Moving Image*, ed. Federico Windhausen (San Francisco: SFCBooks, 2013), 21-22.

form, they were also best placed to take on this role. This was the conclusion of Birgit Hein who, in the late 1970s raised the question of what it meant for the work when filmmakers felt it important to write, not just about their own work in program notes, but about new developments in experimental filmmaking more broadly. In the absence of a substantial body of criticism, artists themselves, she wrote, found it “necessary to write about the films to help in their understanding.”⁴⁰ Explanation hardly exhausts the range of rhetorical modes that we find in program notes, which may also eschew explanation or exegesis altogether, and which then as now, served multiple functions, including publicity. But historically, at least, it has been one mode among others.

When Maya Deren founded the Film Artists Society in 1953 (which became the Independent Filmmakers’ Association two years later), she made inviting filmmakers to discuss their work a regular part of meetings. This practice continued at the Millennium Film Workshop and Cineprobe, the avant-garde film series launched at the Museum of Modern Art [MoMA] in 1968. In New York, as elsewhere in the mid-to-late 1960s, the practice of having filmmakers present at screenings was tied to the single-artist screening. Jacobs’ programming at Millennium in the first couple of years prioritized one-person shows with filmmakers in attendance.⁴¹ Cineprobe also adopted this format, and when Anthology Film Archives opened its programming to include Friday night screenings of films not included in the Essential Cinema series in the early-1970s, it also stuck to the format of the one-person show (often programmed by filmmakers themselves). Within and without experimental film communities,

⁴⁰ Birgit Hein, “On Structural Studies,” in *Structural Film Anthology*, ed. and intro. Peter Gidal (London: BFI, 1978), 114.

⁴¹ At its first weekly screening at St. Mark’s Church In-the-Bowery, in 1966, Millennium showed films by Storm De Hirsch (December 4); followed, over the month, by screenings of films by Andrew Noren (December 11), Hilary Harris (December 18) and Jud Yalkut (December 25). The Millennium Film Workshop developed out of a federal, Anti-Poverty, grant to the New School and St. Mark’s Church-In-The-Bowery aimed, in part, at addressing youth poverty through the establishment of workshop programs. After the Rev. Michael C. Allen fired the program’s director, Jacobs, the Millennium Film Workshop continued as an independent organisation.

the practice of having filmmakers lead discussion with audiences has certainly had its detractors. Chuck Kleinhans clearly had provocation in mind when, in the mid-1980s, he speculated that this tradition of placing filmmakers in the position of explaining their work (with no regard, he pointed out, for their suitability for the role) may actually have put off newcomers.⁴²

Thinking accessibility in situ forces film critics to reflect on their own methods for negotiating all this generative discursivity. How often, after all, have critics cribbed key ideas and critical tropes from program notes (sometimes reproducing them in barely transformed form)? As far as any historical consideration of how experimental films get framed for audiences is concerned, there is no question of choosing between being interested/not interested in what filmmakers have to say about their work. The artisanal nature of experimental filmmaking, the fact that films are most often made by a single artist, or a collaboration between artists working closely together, makes filmmakers important sources of information about the ideas animating, and the methods for approaching, the work. It doesn't take a champion of a certain kind of modernism to make the case that how an artwork has been made is at least partly what it is about. When Susanne K. Langer proposed, in *Feeling and Form* (1951), that "the most vital issues in philosophy of art stem from the studio," she was not making the same point Frampton made when he suggested, in the mid-1970s, that "the compositional process is the oversubject of any text whatever."⁴³ But she was

⁴² Kleinhans was responding to Tery Cannon's call in *Spiral* to respond to the reasons for declining audiences for experimental film. Kleinhans wrote: "No matter how inarticulate, hostile, egomaniacal, spaced out, or stupid, the sole artist was assumed to be the best person to lead discussion following a show. Many self-respecting audience members quickly figured out what was wrong with this practice and didn't come back." See Chuck Kleinhans in "Point of View," *Spiral* 8 (July 1986), 10. A number of filmmakers and critics who responded to this invitation went back to the 1960s (and earlier) to find a period in which experimental film screenings (sometimes) attracted larger audiences. What no one said, even though it is clear from many of their comments and complaints is that, by the end of the 1960s, the field of experimental filmmaking had well and truly diversified.

⁴³ See Susanne K. Langer, *Feeling and Form: A Theory of Art Developed from Philosophy in a New Key* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1953), 14 and Hollis Frampton, "Notes on

making the point that the work is composed in and through decisions that occur in the process of its making.

Thinking accessibility in situ means recognizing that while filmmakers' remarks contribute to the historical meaning of the work, they are only part of that account; and further, that what filmmakers have to say may contribute to more or less contracting or more or less expanding the range of ways it might be understood. The great value of formalist, or, more descriptively and less pejoratively, formal-historical, methods of engaging with experimental films is that they recognize in the work's formal intentionality the potential for finding commonality with other films and other art (and social) practice—regardless of whether these areas of commonality have been identified by the artists who made them.

Not all programming is engaged in analogous critical activity, but all programming is engaged in critical activity of some kind. In often only weakly discursive (and, admittedly, not always compelling) ways, programming presents film scholars with traces of a potential orientation to the work for historical audiences, and exposure to something of the range of ways that the work has been presented over time. It can't be said that the framing of experimental films through programming and, inextricably, social, institutional location, has gone unremarked upon by experimental film scholars—MacDonald's books on the Art and Cinema series and Cinema 16 are both a model of and a resource for such scholarship—but programming remains, at least as far as scholarly criticism is concerned, one of the least examined aspects of the history of experimental film exhibition.⁴⁴

Not only does the orienting work of programming begin with social, institutional location, it has sometimes been the case that this has been the primary site of critical activity. Willard

Composing in Film," in *On the Camera Arts and Consecutive Matters: The Writings of Hollis Frampton*, ed. and intro. Bruce Jenkins (Cambridge, MA and London: MIT Press, 2015), 149.

⁴⁴ See Scott MacDonald, *Art in Cinema: Documents Toward a History of the Film Society* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2006) and *Cinema 16: Documents Toward a History of the Film Society* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2002). Also see the special issue of *Wide Angle*, edited by Erik Barnouw and Patricia Zimmerman on the Flaherty Seminar: *Wide Angle* 17, nos. 1-4 (1995-96).

Van Dyke's appointment as Director of the Museum of Modern Art's Film Department in 1965 was key to the establishment of Cineprobe. Van Dyke came to the museum having been involved in documentary and avant-garde filmmaking for over three decades. Whether or not he seriously entertained the possibility that having filmmakers present at screenings to discuss their work with audiences on a regular basis—a novelty for the museum—would attract (and keep) newcomers, a press release announcing the launch of the series certainly put newcomers in the driver's seat: "It is seldom that an audience has occasion to receive first hand information from the film-maker,' Mr. Van Dyke declared. 'Now questions about style or concept can be addressed to the man who made the film and the audience should be better able to understand the motivation and problems encountered by today's film-maker.'"⁴⁵ What Van Dyke also knew, of course, is that there was already an audience, or, rather, audiences, for experimental film in New York in 1968. The Gate Theater, opened by Aldo and Elsa Tambellini, had been showing underground film since 1966.⁴⁶ Mekas was still running film screenings under the aegis of the Film-Makers' Cinematheque, and while Jacobs and Millennium had parted ways with St. Mark's Church In-the-Bowery, Millennium was now showing films at its own premises.⁴⁷

Not only would it be the case that experimental filmmakers would bring their own audiences to the museum—by the time the museum announced the final programs in Cineprobe's seventeenth season (1984-85) its stated aim had become "to encourage dialogue between independent artists and *their* audience"—the streaming of the museum's film program into a number of series already provided a structure for catering to audiences with

⁴⁵ Press release no. 132, Tuesday December 17, 1968. Accessed June 25, 2017. Available at:

https://www.moma.org/momaorg/shared/pdfs/docs/press_archives/4158/releases/MOMA_1968_July-December_0090_132.pdf?2010

⁴⁶ The Gate Theater was located at 162 Second Avenue at 10th Street. In 1967, Tambellini and Otto Piene opened the performance space, The Black Gate, upstairs at The Gate Theater.

⁴⁷ In 1968 the Millennium Film Workshop was located at 46 Great Jones Street.

special interests.⁴⁸ Cineprobe joined a program that included “Shorts, Art Films and Documentaries” on Wednesdays at noon, “Films from the Archive” on Wednesdays, and “History of the Film” on Saturdays, along with retrospectives organized around directors, actors, and genres.⁴⁹ Curator Adrienne Mancia’s introduction to the first screening in the Cineprobe series—six films by George and Mike Kuchar—cannily situated the series in relationship to the museum’s other offerings.⁵⁰ She began by reading a letter of complaint: “After the preview program of Cineprobe last month, I received the following letter: ‘Dear Miss Mancia: You mean well but *David Holzman’s Diary* was not a good choice, in fact uninteresting and bad—even the hippies walked out. Please no such selection on future Tuesdays. Why not a revival of Garbo’s *Anna Christie* or Norma Shearer’s *Marie Antoinette* some of these days? Maybe some Lilian Harvey pictures too—yours very sincerely.’”⁵¹ Mancia’s opener was perfectly pitched for the amusement of those in the audience who knew exactly what they had paid for, and provided just the right segue, for those still unsure, into an explanation of the series’ aims, and the difference between it and other series in the museum’s regular calendar, gently urging attendees to follow their interests.

Although it would take many more decades, and a turn toward thematic and multidisciplinary programming on the part of modern art museums worldwide, before experimental films presented in the museum auditorium would be regularly exhibited in the gallery, the founding of Cineprobe in the late 1960s marked an important moment for experimental film programming. By establishing this program, a major art institution

⁴⁸ Press release no. 26, April 1985. Emphasis mine. Accessed June 25, 2017. Available at: https://www.moma.org/momaorg/shared/pdfs/docs/press_archives/6172/releases/MOMA_1985_0026_26.pdf?2010

⁴⁹ See, for example, press release no. 14, February 1, 1968. Accessed June 25, 2017. Available at: https://www.moma.org/momaorg/shared/pdfs/docs/press_archives/3997/releases/MOMA_1968_Jan-June_0014_14.pdf?2010

⁵⁰ The series was co-curated by then Assistant Curator, Lawrence Kardish.

⁵¹ Sound Recordings of Museum-Related Events, “An evening with George and Mike Kuchar” (November 5, 1968; 5:30 p.m.; MoMA Auditorium). The Museum of Modern Art Archives, New York, NY.

acknowledged the contributions young avant-garde filmmakers were making to the continuing vitality and diversity of film art. Cineprobe was located at MoMA, where European avant-garde films had been shown since the late 1930s, and where the case for the artistic importance of diverse kinds of industrially produced films had already been made. Cineprobe made the same case for the work of postwar avant-garde filmmakers just by creating space for the series within the museum's regular calendar.

The Essential Cinema series' representation of avant-garde filmmakers would come to be seen by film critics and historians as egregious in the extreme in its "incompleteness" (including films made by just five women, and only four American avant-garde films made before 1945). However, it shared with Cineprobe the critical, historiographical enterprise of situating the work of postwar American avant-garde filmmakers within the history of film art internationally, making the claim for its artistic importance through representation alongside that of more widely recognized filmmakers. While it wasn't the expressed aim of the selection committee to do so, its reduced selection of international film art reproduced, in capsule form, the Museum of Modern Art's own collection.⁵² After postwar American avant-garde films, the films making up the series are overwhelmingly European. In the late 1960s, these were already widely recognized as examples of film art due to programming at film societies and circulating and exhibition programs like the ones in the MoMA Film Department. A number of the European avant-garde films in the Essential Cinema series are among the first collected by Barry in the mid-1930s, and the films of Carl Th. Dreyer—the best represented of the feature film directors in the series—were also shown at MoMA in the mid-1960s.

⁵² On the history of the Film Library at the Museum of Modern Art see Haidee Wasson, *Museum Movies: The Museum of Modern Art and the Birth of Art Cinema* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press, 2005). The Film Library was renamed the Film Department at Van Dyke's instigation. See James L. Enyeart, *Willard Van Dyke: Changing the World through Photography and Film* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2008), 271-272.

With Cineprobe, Essential Cinema, and the New American Filmmakers series at the Whitney Museum of American Art (est. 1970) making the case for the international artistic significance of the postwar American avant-garde, new organizations became centers for other kinds of programming and other kinds of conversation. In New York in the early 1970s, regular programs of film, video, music, and performance at new artist-run film and media arts centers such as The Kitchen (est. 1971) and The Collective For Living Cinema (est. 1973) distinguished themselves from existing programs through differences of organizational structure and programming, as well as the social ambience that went along with those differences. Single-artist screenings remained important at the Collective, but so were group programs. Early screenings at their first venue, the basement church theater, Central Arts, at the Central Presbyterian Church, included group programs representing young filmmakers—notable for the number of women being shown—and a midnight event entitled “Analysis of Cooking: Lecture and Food by the Artist” by Peter Kubelka.⁵³

It made all the difference that the Collective For Living Cinema came after Cineprobe and after the establishment of Anthology Film Archives. When the Invisible Cinema closed its doors at Joseph Papp’s Public Theater on Lafayette Street and took up residence at 80 Wooster Street, Anthology became a venue for expanded cinema and other types of performance.⁵⁴ Over the second half of the 1970s, and into the 1980s, performance at the Collective took on an even greater variety of forms: music concerts, film screenings accompanied by live music, lectures by scholars and filmmakers, expanded cinema performances, and other forms of electronic and/ or mixed media performance. The Collective

⁵³ The Central Arts Theater at the Central Presbyterian Church was at 108 East 64th Street. The program for November 9, 1973 was a group show of films by Diego Cortezberg, Terry Berkowitz, Margie [Marjorie] Keller, Christa-da Maiwald and Colen [Colleen] Fitzgibbon. On November 23, 1973 the Collective presented a group show of films by Ken Ross, Charles Levi and Amy Halpern. Kubelka’s “Analysis of Cooking” was limited to an audience of fifty given on November 30, 1973.

⁵⁴ The building at 80-82 Wooster Street was purchased by the Fluxhouse Cooperative (established by Jonas Mekas’s friend George Maciunas) in 1967.

was founded by graduates of the Cinema Department at Binghamton University, where Jacobs and Lawrence Gottheim taught, and where Jacobs' theorizing of para-cinema—which he described in a flyer for a workshop on para-cinema as “a cinematic work employing some of the consciousness and values, but not the traditional means of cinema, i.e. camera and projector”—provided a framework for situating cinema within a longer history of projected moving images.⁵⁵ From the mid-1970s to the early-1980s, a number, if by no means all, of the performances and presentations at the Collective were occasions for exploring the historical and conceptual parameters of cinema: among them, Alfons Schilling's 3D slide performances (1975, 1977); Tom Gunning and Charles Musser's re-creation of a program of films and magic lantern slides circa 1905 (1979); a lecture and screening of early trick films by Lucy Fischer (1980); Jacobs' Nervous System performances (1975, 1980); and Gunning's lecture/demonstration of the magic lantern and screening of early films by Edwin S. Porter, Segundo de Chomón and D.W. Griffith (1982).

Any conversation with film programmers reveals a mix of personal and organizational considerations, including economic and practical tradeoffs, that factor into programming and have a bearing on its critical aims.⁵⁶ What we have in programming, but especially in

⁵⁵ The five filmmakers that founded the Collective For Living Cinema are Ken Ross, Phil Weisman, Lushe Sacker, Andrea Graff and Mark Graff. This description of para-cinema appears on a flyer for a workshop on para-cinema held at the Boulder Public Library in 1978. See Artist File, Anthology Film Archives Library, NY. The programs of the Collective For Living Cinema are also held at the Anthology Film Archives Library. MacDonald's interviews with graduates of the Binghamton Cinema Department offer further insight into students' own explorations of para-cinema. See Scott M. MacDonald, *Binghamton Babylon: Voices From the Cinema Department 1967-1977*, fwd. J. Hoberman (Albany, NY: SUNY, 2015).

⁵⁶ In the mid-1980s, Guttenplan outlined some of these considerations in conversation with MacDonald about his programming at Millenium: “Of course, there are many practical considerations such as the availability of filmmakers and films, travel plans of filmmakers. The mix includes the introduction of new filmmakers (e.g., Hollis Frampton in the ‘60s), ongoing new work by veterans, local work, films from different regions of the U.S., films from abroad, political and stylistic concerns, etc. We try to reflect the various strands of the avant-garde as we see it.” See MacDonald, “The Millennium after Twenty Years,” 15-16. For other writing on film programming see *Incite Journal of Experimental Media* 4 Exhibition Guide (Fall 2013) and Federico Windhausen, “Questions For The Present,” *Millennium Film*

conceptual, thematic, and historical forms of programming are traces of a propositional and orienting, as opposed to exegetical, framing of films, only sometimes supplemented by critical writing in program notes. While individual programs may have been arrived at through a whole host of invisible pragmatic concerns, and while programming can also be uninformed, or uninteresting, badly conceived, or too interested—it is not for nothing that complaining and gossiping about programming is part of the ordinary glue of film festival socializing—looking at programming enriches our understanding of how films and performances have been contextualized over time.

Accessibility and Historiography

It has been the aim of this brief canvassing of the historical obstacles to, and routes towards, theorizing accessibility to arrive at a working understanding of it that is different from, but also compatible with, at least some of the ways that critics and artists already understand it. Taking an interest in accessibility means taking an interest in the many different forms that critical-theoretical ideas about experimental film practices, and their methods for meaningfully engaging with social experience, take. Here, however, it needs to be acknowledged that finding and accessing materials related to just some of the contexts in which an artist's films might have been shown can present considerable practical challenges and obstacles. Artists themselves, of course, often collect and keep things: ephemeral things related to the exhibition of their work not found in the artist files kept by libraries (programmes, program notes, advertising flyers and exhibition keepsakes). However, personal

Journal 59, Since 78 and Beyond, 35th Anniversary Edition vol. 2 (Spring 2014), 76-84. For an international perspective on issues relating to curating in the context of film archives and museums see Paolo Cherchi Usai, David Francis, Alexander Howarth, and Michael Loebenstein, eds. *Film Curatorship: Archives, Museums, and the Digital Marketplace* (Vienna: Austrian Film Museum, 2008). Also see *The Future of Short Film* issue of *OnCurating* 23 (May 2014). For an overview of models of curating, not specifically addressed to film, see Paul O'Neill, *The Culture of Curating and the Curating of Culture(s)* (Cambridge, MA and London: MIT Press, 2012).

collections of artists' papers often only make it into university and museum archives after an artist has died and, from the perspective of living filmmakers, it isn't necessarily feasible to make such materials available to anyone who asks. Detailed investigation of specific programs and organisations may also be hampered by the fact that records can be patchy, or may never have been kept to begin with, or, again, may only have been kept as personal collections by individuals. Sometimes, too, archives wind up at major cultural and art institutions where, in an environment in which there is stiff competition for resources, they can remain uncatologued for some time.⁵⁷

One of the critical issues that arises from making ideas about an artist's work that circulate through exhibition, and all the writing and talk that exhibition generates, an object of historical investigation, is that of navigating a path through it. Coming at an artist's work with an eye on the matter of its accessibility is always going to entail making decisions about what it is and isn't interesting to consider. This makes any historical study it might generate as much a conceptual-theoretical enterprise as an historiographical one. To the extent that what is being investigated are the cultural, institutional, contexts for ideas, the field of historical investigation also just as obviously can't be limited to discourse generated within the field of experimental film. To take a concrete example, one of the most significant nodes for artists' and critics' theorizing of cinema as medium in the 1960s and 1970s was expanded cinema. What we find, I suggest, in some of the writing on and programming of expanded cinema during this period—but also, of course, in expanded cinema performances themselves—is an identification of medium, not with materials, in any limited sense of an industrially produced apparatus, but with a history of intersecting practices: scientific and entertainment practices, before and after the industrialization and institutionalization of cinema, and the practice of cinema by post-war avant-garde artists. We see this very clearly, for instance, in the shadow

⁵⁷ This is the situation, for the time being, for the archives of the Millennium Film Workshop, which were sold to the Museum of Modern Art (NY) in 2015.

plays Jacobs developed over this period, and in his theorization of them as para-cinema.⁵⁸ In the 1970s, film historians' excavations of the mixed-media event of early cinema exhibition offered another kind of expanded view of cinema. Both similar and different, again, are the archaeological accounts of the history of cinema that we find in popular, journalistic and educational discourse; ready-to-hand in the mid-twentieth-century in, say, encyclopaedia entries on motion pictures.⁵⁹ Mapping the multiple sites in which we find the medium of cinema being defined in terms of a history of practice (or multiple practices) entails, then, looking further afield than the immediate contexts of exhibition and review of expanded cinema.

The other direction in which historical research, guided by an interest in accessibility, tends, is towards investigation of the social environment of experimental filmmaking and film-going. Before the mid-1990s, but afterwards, too, being involved in experimental cinema is something that, for artists and audiences alike, has often been important in local ways; for individual filmmakers, very much about making films in a particular city, and engaging with the cultural life of that city at a particular time. Something of the social relationships, which have been important for making work, and for creating screening environments that matter to people, needs, I think, to filter through the way we write about experimental cinema if we are to speak to the matter of accessibility.

In this essay I have argued that it is a condition of possibility for theorizing the accessibility of American experimental cinema to approach it from the perspective of the small audiences for whom it is most meaningful. I have also suggested that following the

⁵⁸ Jacobs' first shadow play was *THE BIG BLACKOUT OF '65: Chapter One "Thirties Man"* (1965). It was developed for the New Cinema Festival (1965) at the invitation of Mekas (1965). Between 1965 and 1982, Jacobs developed at least twelve separate shadow play performances.

⁵⁹ These issues are examined in depth in an account of the exhibition of Jacobs' shadow plays in the 1960s and 1970s. See Michele Pierson, "Where Shadow Play is Cinema: The Exhibition and Critical Reception of Ken Jacobs' Shadow Plays," *Film History* 29, no. 3 (2017), forthcoming.

paper trails that enable us to retrace (some of) the ways work by individual filmmakers has been presented, written and talked about is an important route to making those perspectives tangible. I want to conclude, however, by returning to the matter of accessibility and pleasure. So much experimental cinema is extravagantly generous in its solicitation of (audio)visual and narrative pleasures; some particular to it and some not. Pleasure, in fact, is as important a site for shared experience and the articulation of social and aesthetic value in this cinema as in any other. To engage with the accessibility of the avant-garde is also and finally, then, to investigate its pleasures. This means engaging with all the contexts in which it is important to situate them—but it should also mean engaging closely with the films and performances and gallery installations that it interests us to talk about; and saying something about their means for making audiences collaborators in the experiences they are the occasion for.